

## *Discussion*

### ON SOVIET GENETICS

MAY I add another footnote to the papers on Soviet genetics? It appears to me that the support unquestionably given to Lysenko had a social rather than a scientific motive behind it. The distinction is not permanently valid; but temporarily it may be so for a State which is prepared to forgo immediate results in the eyes of the external world for the sake of the long-term benefits. Lysenko is the son of a peasant, a product of the new civilising forces. One may deduce from reports of interviews with him, that his own origins dominate his mind and give it its peculiar flavour of fanaticism. But that is an unfortunate by-product. More significant is the fact that Lysenko seems to have a large following among the collective farmers, themselves the eager sons of peasants feeling into the possibilities that life now offers them. It is in the collective farms that the State would gladly see, in the next generation, the maturing of a hundred Michurins and Vavilovs.

The chosen catalyst in this process of calling out the latent genius of the farms is Lysenko himself. He preaches not merely a somewhat perverse set of scientific theories, but the ability of the Soviet farmer to become a scientist. He demonstrates it in his person; and his practical work on vernalization and potato culture is widely known and followed in the U.S.S.R.

Lysenko, in brief, is a sociological and not a biological function in Soviet life. His scientific meaning must in my view, be assessed by those who remember that the Soviet State is the scientific midwife of a new civilisation. Now that the task Lysenko was called upon to perform is nearing its completion, his importance seems likely to diminish. The genius of the farms will have been slowly revealed and will be ready to merge with the traditional forms of science, that all evidence shows to be still vigorous in the U.S.S.R.

This way of looking at the event is not always comprehensible in the West, where the process of social change is not realised as a matter of applied science. But once this realisation comes, there should be no excuse for misunderstanding the Soviet intentions. As for the story of Vavilov's death, I have been able to find no proof that attaches prime responsibility to Lysenko. Yet Lysenko is a fanatic in his way; and the human mind at times permits situations to arise, where its own responsibility is scarcely clear to it. What I do know is that tales are being repeated by British and American scientists, into the source of which they never seem to inquire; and if Lysenko is in any sense guilty, they too are denying the basic law of science, which demands that theories shall be based on verified evidence.

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